



2020-0013132VFPO

Vicky Ford MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

Sanctuary Buildings 20 Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus

Stephanie Wood, Founder/CEO, School Food Matters and co-Chair School Food Plan Alliance
Jeanette Orrey MBE, co-Founder Food for Life and co-Chair School Food Plan Alliance
Kath Dalmeny, Chief Executive, Sustain; the alliance for better food and farming
Anna Taylor OBE, Executive Director, The Food Foundation
Naomi Duncan, Chief Executive, Chefs in Schools
James Bielby, Chief Executive, Federation of Wholesale Distributors
Barbara Crowther, Coordinator, Children's Food Campaign
Rob Percival, Head of Policy (food and health), Soil Association

By email: stephanie@schoolfoodmatters.org

31 March 2020

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your letters of 20 March, 24 March and 31 March, addressed to the Secretary of State, about the provision of free school meals during the coronavirus outbreak. I am replying as the Minister responsible for school food.

Thank you very much for welcoming the guidance for schools that we have published, which explains what schools should do to make sure that eligible pupils have continued access to free school meals. Schools which are open for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children should provide meal options for staff and children who are in school, and free school meals for all eligible pupils in attendance. We also expect schools to continue to provide support for children who are eligible for free school meals who are staying at home during this period. The guidance is available at: tinyurl.com/vu2ub7f.

Schools should speak to their school catering team or provider to see if they can prepare meals or food parcels that could be delivered to or collected by families who are eligible for free school meals. I understand your views on the consequences on the public sector food industry if their demand for school meals falls during this period. Our guidance is clear that these providers can continue to provide meals to schools for collection and delivery, and we have advised schools to speak to their suppliers about continuing this provision in the first instance.

We have asked schools to ensure that any meal collections or food parcels are distributed in line with social distancing guidelines. Collecting these meals from a school is of course a legitimate reason to leave home.

The government is aware that during the outbreak, some suppliers may face risks in terms of their financial viability, ability to retain staff, and their supply chains. The Cabinet Office has published guidance for public bodies on payment of suppliers that are at risk, available at: tinyurl.com/t4nQ39w, and this is highlighted in our guidance for schools on free school meals. Contracting authorities should inform suppliers who they believe are at risk that they will continue to be paid as normal until at least the end of June. We will continue to provide schools with their expected funding, including funding to cover free school meals and universal infant free school meals, throughout this period of closure. More widely, the government has announced a package of measures to support businesses. Further information is available at: tinyurl.com/tsQcPoe.

Where it is not possible for a school to offer collections or food parcels through their suppliers, these schools should offer an alternative to eligible children. To support this, we have developed a national scheme to provide supermarket vouchers for these children via the Edenred online portal. The value of the voucher is £15 each week for every child eligible for benefits-related free school meals who is not attending school. As you mention, we are working to see if additional supermarkets can be added to the list where vouchers can be accepted, and will look carefully at your proposals here.

You asked about provision in the Easter holidays. Whilst the vouchers are for term time only, if there is a local arrangement to supply food that the school and the suppliers intend to continue over this period then that can be agreed and managed locally. This would need to be manageable within schools' existing resources.

We are working with our national voucher supplier to see what further action could be taken around age restrictions and have noted your proposals on this point. You also asked about families that do not spend the full £15 voucher. The voucher takes the form of a Gift card that can be used for multiple transactions, so parents will not lose this money if they do not spend the full amount in one transaction.

By giving schools flexibility on how they can get meals or vouchers, they can make the most appropriate decisions for families in their communities, and provide immediate reassurance to families that this important support will continue. Schools and public sector food suppliers are central to the country's response to the coronavirus outbreak and we are hugely thankful to them for the roles they are playing to support children and families at this time.

Thank you for writing on this important matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vicky Ford". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Vicky Ford MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families